

Tubman visitor center gets \$8.5M for construction

By GAIL DEAN Dorchester Editor | Posted: Wednesday, August 17, 2011 1:00 am

CAMBRIDGE The allocation of \$8.5 million in federal funds for construction of the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Visitor Center was announced Tuesday by Gov. Martin O'Malley at the Harriet Tubman Museum on Race Street.

The announcement of funding through the Federal Transportation Enhancement Program for construction of a visitor center at the Harriet Tubman State Park is one more piece fit into the puzzle of creating Harriet Tubman National Historic Parks on the Eastern Shore of Maryland and in Auburn, N.Y., where Tubman spent the final years of her life.

Born into slavery around 1821 in Dorchester County, the date of Tubman's birth remains unknown. History does provide the date of her death, March 10, 1913. Plans are to have the visitor center constructed in time for the 100th anniversary of Harriet's passing.

There was much cheering and applause from the group of state and local officials gathered for O'Malley's announcement. The group included Maryland Natural Resources Secretary John Griffin, Maryland Del. Rudy Cane, D-37A, and representatives from the offices of U.S. Sens. Barbara Mikulski and Ben Cardin, who have both sponsored pending legislation to create Harriet Tubman National Historic Parks to be managed by the National Park Service. Mikulski also played a critical role in obtaining nearly \$1 million in grants for the project from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

"If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Harriet Tubman knew that and so do I. Her legacy continues to inspire me and I am proud to fight every day for the freedom and equality she dedicated her life to," Mikulski is quoted saying in a press release from the governor's office.

Cambridge Mayor Victoria Jackson-Stanley called the governor's announcement "a major step in keeping the history, legacy and memory of this great woman alive for generations to come in the state of Maryland and around the world."

O'Malley said ground should be broken for the Tubman visitor center next year, temporarily creating an estimated 225 jobs in all facets of the construction industry at the site adjacent to Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge.

The Tubman visitor center will also see creation of 10 full-time jobs, as well as spin-off jobs in the community, O'Malley said.

He said the visitor center won't just benefit Dorchester County and the Eastern Shore. "It's good for the entire state of Maryland," encouraging new visitors to the state and encouraging tourists to spend more time here."

"Once complete, the visitor center will honor one of our nation's great and courageous heroes," the governor said. "Like Marylanders today, Harriet Tubman understood that we progress as people not on the weakness, but on the strength of our neighbors. This visitor center is a step forward in promoting Maryland's critical role in the fight for freedom, in recognizing the efforts of a remarkable Marylander and for creating new jobs on the Eastern Shore. Together, we can educate and share the story of how Harriet Tubman and those like her changed the course of American history, bending the arc toward justice.

"There is no greater story than the life of Harriet Tubman," O'Malley said, explaining that aspect of Tubman's life which most impresses him is, "the returning," referring to more than a dozen journeys she made back to Maryland to lead family, friends and other enslaved people north to freedom along secretive routes now known as the Underground Railroad.

The governor said Tubman's life demonstrates that, "What we do as individuals does matter."

Harriet Tubman Organization President Donald Pinder also offered thanks for the funding. Noting that Tubman left her estate to her church, Pinder said that Tubman "continued to give throughout her life." With construction of the visitors center, he said, "now it's our turn to give back to her."